DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 455 063 RC 023 059

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TITLE The Role of Elders and Elder Teachings: A Core Aspect of Child and Youth Care Education in First Nations Communities.
PUB DATE 2000-05-00
NOTE 7p.; In: Issues Affecting Rural Communities (II). Proceedings of the International Conference [on] Rural Communities & Identities in the Global Millennium (Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada, May 1-5, 2000); see RC 023 040.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *American Indian Education; Canada Natives; *College Programs; *Cultural Maintenance; *Culturally Relevant Education; Foreign Countries; Human Services; *Nontraditional Education; Older Adults; Postsecondary Education; School Community Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Intergenerational Transmission

ABSTRACT

First Nations communities have particular needs to maintain cultural values as a central aspect of community. Elders, as the bearers of traditions and experience, are both the appropriate source and the appropriate vehicle for the maintenance and transmission of those values. On Vancouver Island, Malaspina University College delivers Child and Youth Care (CYC) First Nations 2-year diploma programs that incorporate the teachings of local elders through weekly seminars. Themes and topics covered in the seminars are subsequently woven into assignments and evaluation for other courses in the curriculum. This strategy aims to produce human services practitioners who understand the people, issues, and dynamics of the local area, as well as larger themes concerning worldview and identity. At the same time, provision of education in the home area lowers the monetary and social costs typically incurred when students go away to college. This paper defines elders and their traditional roles as teachers and role models; describes the relationship between elders and the teachings, the ongoing educational and social impact of oral tradition in Native communities, and the nature of intergenerational transmission of culture within the community; and discusses elements of the CYC program concerned with community connections, student engagement, and protocols of respect and proper conduct in the Elder Teachings course. (SV)

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The Role Of Elders And Elder Teachings: A Core Aspect Of Child And Youth Care Education In First Nations Communities

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Abstract

First Nations communities have particular needs to maintain cultural values as a central aspect of community values and that elders and the traditions and experience that they hold are both the appropriate sources and the appropriate vehicles for the maintenance and transmission of those values. This thesis is elaborated through reference to programs currently delivered by Malaspina University-College Human Services area, and in particular the Child and Youth Care First Nations diploma programs at Cowichan and Port Hardy. The students who attend are predominantly individuals whose origins are in rural communities; the case is made that First Nations communities in western Canada, regardless of location, share a set of needs and characteristics with rural communities in general. The importance of elder teachings to the education process is examined for cultural relevance, local needs, family and historical links, and practitioner competence.

The issues

The discussion of rural and urban as terms or concepts that apply to First Nations people and communities has proceeded through a variety of viewpoints. Parallel with this ongoing discussion, the understanding of what constitutes urban versus rural, and what is the meaning and significance of the differences between the two, has seen it's own alterations and discipline-specific evolution. Briefly, and without comparing the values attached to the terms, in this presentation we recognize the emergence of a number of conflicting themes that might apply to educational programs specifically tailored to meet the needs of First Nations:

- There is "an oft-cited externally imposed dichotomy between urban and rural, based on the lingering stereotype that "Indian" is synonymous with rural and that urban is somehow not genuinely Indian" (Lobo, 1998, p. 93).
- Urban adaptation is the logical outcome for all, and particularly for "Natives" in adjusting to the demands of modern technological society (discussed in Grantham-Campbell, 1998, p. 386).
- The urban-rural continuum approach does not adequately represent today's world in which "telephones, television and the internet expose every reservation to the problems and perks of urban life"(Strauss & Valentino, 1998, p. 105).
- The intertribal or "pan-Indian" identity assumed by many urban-based Aboriginal people does not imply discontinuity in relation to home areas, tribes or bands (Strauss & Valentino, 1998, p.105).

The critical issue in response to these themes is our contention that many of the educational needs of First Nations communities cannot be met through educational programs that take place far away from the home area. Needs for human services practitioners, in this case in the Child and Youth Care (CYC) discipline, require trained graduates who know and understand all about the people, issues and dynamics of the local area, as well as larger themes concerning worldview and identity. The core component in fulfilling that requirement is access to those people who represent First Nations knowledge and traditions: the elders. Education that provides meaningful contact between students and elders can produce graduates who have the requisite local understanding as well as the generic skills and information relevant to the discipline. In other words, relevant education for First Nations CYC students can only take place where there is access to elders, and in our experience, that means in or close to their home areas.

The attractiveness of education in the home area derives from many factors, two primary ones being 1) a reduced monetary cost for education close to home in relation to being away from home, and 2) a social cost involved in the severing of close ties, both short and long-term (for those who go away to school, there are always some who choose never to return on a full-time basis). Both of these costs are borne in various ways both by the student and by the band or community.

There are arguments to the effect that the First Nations urban phenomenon goes beyond those issues that concern loss of tribal identity and culture (Strauss, & Valentino, 1998; Grantham-Campbell, 1998), nonetheless, these issues are alive and well in the voices and minds of those who continue to live in the home areas. In addition to fears about both the financial costs and the social connectedness of those who leave for educational purposes, there is the psychological residue left from the residential school system. A strong memory remains from the era when First Nations customs and societal practices were attacked and repressed, a memory of children being taken forcibly from their home environments and sent "away" to school where they became estranged from their homes, families and culture. In subsequent generations up to the present day, that experience, collectively and individually, negatively

RC 023059

affected the attitudes of many people in First Nations communities, including students and potential students. Education was, and in many cases continues to be seen as an instrument of ongoing colonialism, which imposes a "Eurocentric," "superior," worldview over an Aboriginal, "inferior," one.

Post-secondary education in British Columbia (BC) has tended to be an urban phenomenon, an outgrowth of demographic shifts, economic and population growth, based in regional and provincial centres. However, in recent years there has been a developing trend in First Nations communities to look for ways to create educational opportunities for their members closer to home, and for educational institutions to begin to respond to those needs. On Vancouver Island, Malaspina University-College has delivered Child and Youth Care First Nations two-year diploma programs since 1993. Currently there are two, duplicate, programs, one at Malaspina's Cowichan campus in Duncan, and another in the Port Hardy area. The former was developed from a partnership between Cowichan Tribes, Malaspina, and the University of Victoria's School of Child and Youth Care, which developed the concept for the program (Kuehne & Pence, 1993). The latter was developed through a partnership between Malaspina and the Tri-Bands consisting of the Kwakiutl, the Quatsino, the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw Bands.

A central feature of these programs is that students meet with local elders weekly, throughout the two years, in seminars that are credited, university-transferable courses. The themes and topics covered in the elder teachings seminars are subsequently woven into the assignments and evaluation for the other courses in the curriculum (Cooke-Dallin & Underwood, 1998). This is the aspect of the programs that makes them relevant and responsive, each in its locale.

Definitions

What do we mean when we refer to "elders" and what is their role in First Nations
culture? Let us begin with some definitions.
Elders are those persons in a First Nations community who are recognized for their wisdom, knowledge and their life experience, as it relates to the community. They are people who are expected to share their teachings.
Teachings are messages about what is right and wrong: how to act, how to perform, how to understand – within the context of the correct attitude to hold. In First Nations tradition, teachings are practiced and passed along within families; they may vary from family to family, although through marriage and social ties they often become known within an extended family and beyond. In earlier days they were based on real-life examples, descriptions, live modeling, or on the content of stories or legends. In recent times the concept of teachings has come to mean more than family traditions by including suggestions of how to be successful in response to the demands of western culture, especially in regard to how to maintain First Nations culture in an effective coexistence with western culture.

The relationship between elders and the teachings

As teachers, elders carry the responsibility of maintaining the core message of the knowledge they hold. They are not empowered to change the words, sometimes an elder will preface a teaching by saying "these are not my words". Although the teachings are not subject to editorial control, they can certainly be adapted to the particular circumstances at hand, and it is the wisdom of the elder that brings forth appropriate teachings when they are needed.

In the home area and the local community, teachings are transmitted at a number of venues, among these are, 1) in the home informally as an aspect of everyday life; once upon a time this was how children learned most of the knowledge and skills required for daily living, 2) in the home more formally at family gatherings, when for instance, elders will share and discuss teachings during and after a family meal, 3) at a community cultural event or ceremony, such as a naming, a memorial, a traditional wedding or adoption, a funeral or a school event; elders will share teachings as part of the ceremonies in community buildings and churches, 4) at the bighouse as a main feature of traditional bighouse proceedings. Beyond these occurrences, the elders and teachings may be central to treaty and land claims, court proceedings, medical and scientific meetings and conferences concerning any number of themes.

Elders who are role models demonstrate a willingness to be approached and to share, they prepare through practice and through practice they become recognized and trusted. Their behaviour as elders is consistent with the teachings about conduct and attitude (about how to be "right" in the world). They show humility, candour and honest self-disclosure, an unaffected manner, integrity in their dealings, sensitivity to others, politeness, and success in coping with community and personal circumstances. Elders model consistency in their respect for, and adherence to, cultural traditions. A large part of the role involves reinforcing the goals and efforts of younger people, for instance, education is often promoted as a means to succeed as a person as and a community member, within the larger context of life, and "life is an education".

All of the teachings have a long-range focus in a way that western culture does not. They are concerned with the people and the culture as ongoing and permanent phenomena, existing inseparable from, and connected

holistically to, all of the seen and unseen world. This viewpoint reflects a legacy of oral history through which events and family members can be recalled and revisited through scores of generations and hundreds of years.

The ongoing impact of oral tradition contains both educational and social dimensions. Its most essential characteristic is that it requires both a speaker (or "presenter") and a listener (or "participant") in order to occur. As described above, the transmission of teachings takes place most often in groups. There the links between the generations are strengthened through a common regard for the teachings, and for the comforting presence of the elders (Stiegelbauer, 1996). The sharing contributes to a number of interactive and interconnected factors:

- Group affiliation is increased through shared experiences. Respect and attention to the speaker are modelled
- Memory and processing skills are practiced. The presence of the elder has a positive impact on the participants
- The elder "reads" and responds to the characteristics of the audience. Thus the continual process of education that is accomplished through sharing the teachings orally relies to a large part on the interpersonal human dimensions involved.

The special regard accorded to elders has a number of sources. One very important reason for this respect is their link to the teachings, which are the basis both for survival and for an understanding of the universe - "the Creator, the connection with nature, the order of things and the values that enhance the identity of the people" (Kirkness, V.J., 1998, p. 11). Although it is not necessary to be an elder in order to understand and discuss teachings, it is *specifically* the role of elders to transmit them. Because the accumulation of teachings is considered to be a life-long undertaking, increased age equates to increased knowledge, hence an elder is a source of many teachings. The practice of relying on elders for these purposes is consistent both with the tradition of oral history which has always existed as a feature of First Nations culture and with contemporary practices in First Nations communities, which endorse the special teaching role of elders (Cooke-Dallin & Underwood, 1998, p. 32). And, in a society that values extended family relationships, elders are the symbol as well as the repository of indigenous culture, that is, cumulatively they are the physical representation of the continuity of accumulated knowledge between generations as well as being individually the carriers and communicators of practical knowledge about what to do and how to do it.

It is the elders who can be relied upon to discuss and decide upon all issues that affect the welfare of the community. Because First Nations cultures integrate social, cultural and political functions, all of these are aspects of the elder role. Within these generally overlapping areas of First Nations community systems, elders are acknowledged as the source of authority (understood through the leadership of elders in collective, family and community, group decisions). This tradition, along with others that stress social informality in the relationships attached to everyday affairs, the priority accorded to culture, flexible notions of time, and an emphasis on the recognition and maintenance of extended family relationships, have often placed First Nations in direct conflict with "western bureaucratic forms of organization with their inherent features of specialization, standardization, compartmentalization and systematicity" (Kawagley & Barnhardt, 1998).

Educational programs

In this regard, western education, emphasizing formal learning structures and discrete areas of specialization, has been slow to recognize the intrinsic value of an oral, cumulative, approach to knowledge. As a result, only recently has the importance of the teachings tradition and the elders been acknowledged in the education delivered by BC's post-secondary institutions, and when it does occur it tends to be delivered only in particular circumstances: predominantly in special programs that target First Nations students. In human services programs, with stated core values of cross-cultural perspectives and cultural competency, there are tensions attached to the concepts of individual orientation versus collective orientation, and the concepts of social and cultural progress versus social and cultural sustainability. In this case sustainability means continuous assertion, it does not imply stasis. "... indigenous people...as a matter of cultural survival , have been quick to adapt new technologies and to grasp the 'new world order.' While retaining a keen sense of place and rootedness in the land they occupy, they have not hesitated to take advantage of new opportunities...This is done, however, within their own framework of values, priorities and worldview, so that the developmental trajectory they choose is not always the same as what outsiders might choose for them (Kawagley & Barnhardt, 1998).

Elder Teachings are culturally relevant and hence meaningful to the identities of First Nations students, practitioners and communities. Valuing traditional knowledge by making it central to the educational program, is valuing the students' life experience. Meaningful education must provide students with learning that fits the context of their lives. Through Elder Teachings, students in the CYC First Nations program are given the opportunity to learn skills and theory and develop as practitioners within the context of their own culture.

At the meeting point between post-secondary human services education and traditional First Nations teachings, there appears to be a coalescence of values around an emphasis on family and community. In this regard there seems to be an opportunity for mainstream western approaches to gain from the First Nations understanding of the interdependence that exists between individuals, the families and communities - through which individuals are nurtured in their growth by their family and community, and the family and community are strengthened through the growth of individuals. This is a topic area of immense richness in the teachings everywhere. And such it is an example of an area in which competence for First Nations CYC practitioners can apply to their interactions within service sectors beyond their First Nations communities. There are opportunities to promote a more wide-ranging and inclusive viewpoint on community health as well as to inform non-First Nations people about how effective services are understood from a local First Nations perspective.

At the same time, because CYC education in BC is coordinated through a provincial articulation process, students in all institutions are taught according to shared learning objectives. Consequently, although students in Port Hardy or Duncan will have particular knowledge about their own communities, they will also have the same or equivalent skills and knowledge as students in other institutions and programs within all of the recognized core areas of CYC. In other words, they will be equally prepared for all aspects of practice that do not require specific local knowledge, in any location in the province. In addition, we hear that students who have the opportunity to experience this form of education develop generic skills that are valuable in First Nations contexts beyond the home site, because the respect shown for elders, the role of elders generally, and the concepts of shared worldview and First Nations identity, apply in other areas within BC, and beyond.

There is a sense of being involved in an important process of maintaining connections through learning from elders. Indeed, we hear from many of the elders that they too are continuing to learn and that they do this by going to their own elders. There is an acknowledgment that learning is a life long process.

A concern heard from many of the elders we see is that "children don't listen to their elders anymore". The break down in the traditional system of learning and connecting worries them. Within our classrooms, we begin to rebuild this way of connecting, first by connecting elders to adult students, and second, by connecting students to situations containing children and youth, where they can re-initiate those contacts between the generations. In Cowichan, at least one prominent elder has suggested that, in view of the erosion of many family-based social and cultural practices, it is now appropriate to consider CYC students - who share the elder's emphasis on family - as an important link to cultural information - passing on the teachings that they gain in the seminars.

The connecting that happens within the classroom is often a result of existing connections that students have with elders and also leads to further connections. Students engage from their prior knowledge and with curiosity. During Elder Teaching classes, students will inquire about teachings they have knowledge about; they want to know more and to have their knowledge confirmed. There is a sharing of knowledge within the session. The expectation of the CYC First Nations program is that students will integrate the learning from the Elder Teachings with the content of their course work and practice. Students tend to go beyond this expectation, adding to their learning from the Elder Teachings classes by talking with their own family elders. There is an enthusiasm to continue exploring in-class learning. An elder in class talking about a particular place, person, event or custom often leads to students going to their family members to ask what they know on the same or similar topics. This type of connecting leads to understanding of self and learning about one's own origins. Following an Elder Teachings class where two elders told spoke about the relocation of their reserve, a student said, "I enjoyed having them in because it helped bring back some of the things I had forgotten about my own childhood. Listening to them made me want to go to others in my community and ask questions so I can learn more of what had happened during the move" (C. Demontier, personal communication, January, 2000).

As well as these family and historical connections, there are other community connections that are enhanced through the inclusion of Elders in the CYC First Nations program. Having elders in the classroom means that the community is in the program and the program is in the community. Community links are built through the relationships that local elders have with program participants. This helps to keep the program in the awareness of the community, while in turn, keeping the students aware of community issues. Elders that work in the classroom are often part of students' personal support systems. While we look to elders because we value their traditional knowledge, these same elders are often the greatest encouragers for students in pursuit of their educational goals.

In including elders within the CYC First Nations program our goal is to bring in traditional knowledge, thus, we sometimes engage other resource people. This means we might include someone that might not yet be considered an elder, but that carries traditional knowledge in a particular area, for example, someone skilled at teaching a local First Nations language or songs. Some might refer to these

younger teachers as "elders in training".

The inclusion of elders within an educational program requires a consciousness of and a respect for local customs and protocols. For instance, guest elders in the CYC programs are paid by honoraria in order to acknowledge their learned status as teachers, as well as to recognize them as honoured guests. Lertzman (1996) refers to these payments as "the practice of cultural accountability" (p. 51). He points out that it is always necessary to know how to proceed in a bi-cultural context.

In the traditional First Nations context, there is a strict protocol and procedure for the passing of cultural information. One could regard this as a protocol of respect. The protocol of respect is founded upon: permission, recognition and accountability. How permission is asked and recognition is given may vary from region to region. Yet one will almost always find a procedure in place. In a community where knowledge is transmitted orally, people are held accountable for their actions, their words and the manner in which they conduct themselves according to their protocol (p.48)

A local facilitator plays an important role in ensuring that the Elder Teachings course is conducted appropriately. It would not be fitting for someone from outside of the community, for example, a visiting instructor, to take the lead in coordinating elder's visits to class. One need not have all the answers around protocol, but one must have an awareness about who and what to ask. Students who have strong connections to family and community are also an important source of knowledge around protocol. This attentive way of coordinating the Elder Teachings is a mirror of the lessons we hear from the elders themselves. Many elders have told us about how they too look to others for guidance and permission.

In summary, it is clear that for CYC practitioners in First Nations communities, the importance of education that is tied to the role of elders is served through the following factors:

- the presence of, and access to, the elders
- learning, and incorporating into practice, the teachings provided by elders
- preserving ties to family (in the broad sense);
- day-to-day involvement in, and knowledge of, the community and it's current issues;
- maintaining the link to the homeland and the language;
- access to education that is relevant to current needs

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